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We exhibit at several of the world's most prestigious antique fairs including TEFAF Maastricht and New York, Masterpiece London and Fine Art Asia in Hong Kong.

Historically we have helped the most important collectors build their collection of important English silver.

Koopman Rare Art has sold to and worked with many of the great museums around the world including the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Metropolitan Museum in New York and the National Trust as well as other institutions in Europe, America and Australia.

The website www.koopman.art displays a small selection of our inventory but a visit to one of the fairs or to our gallery will bring these treasures to life.



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The Shield of Achilles

KOOPMAN RARE ART 2021

The Shield of Achilles



KOOPMAN RARE ART

The Five Shields of Achilles

1821-22, sold to King George IV
The Royal Collection.

1821-22, sold to the Duke of York
The Collection of the Huntington Museum and Gallery.

1822-23, sold to the Duke of Northumberland
Private Collection.

1822-23, sold to the Earl of Lonsdale
The Collection of Anglesey Abbey, National Trust.

1823-24, sold to the Duke of Cumberland and King of Hanover
Koopman Rare Art.

THE SHIELD OF ACHILLES, “THE WORLD’S AMAZE”



Chiara Scotto Pasanisi dei Foscari

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FOREWORD

Very few, if any, objects create an excitement and aura like The Shield of Achilles.

So rarely does one get the opportunity to hold and enjoy the shield that it becomes ever more exciting.

We are so proud to take a role in this and to be able to offer the finest and most important silver gilt object of the 19th century. In fact our strong connection with the shield goes back to May 1984 when Jacques Koopman proudly purchased the one made for the Duke of Northumberland for £484,000.

When Rundell, Bridge and Rundell would display their finest wares, many would make the effort to drive by in their carriages from the newly fashionable west end simply to view these marvellous creations.

Today as we examine this shield it still has the same effect. I am very grateful that Koopman Rare Art has the opportunity to be part of this important story.

My thanks to Chiara for her fine work and research in this new catalogue. It is a fascinating and enlightening read. My thanks also go to all our colleagues at Koopman Rare Art that have helped with this project, particularly Timo Koopman.

We look forward to many happy discussions about this historical treasure.

Lewis Smith
Director

www.koopman.art



INTRODUCTION

*“But thou, in pity, by my prayer be won:
Grace with immortal arms this short-lived son,
And to the field in martial pomp restore,
To shine with glory, till he shines no more!”*

*To her the artist-god: “Thy griefs resign,
Secure, what Vulcan can, is ever thine.
O could I hide him from the Fates, as well,
Or with these hands the cruel stroke repel,
As I shall forge most envied arms, the gaze
Of wondering ages, and the world’s amaze!”¹*

In the year 1821 George IV ascended to the British throne following a period of Regency in place of his father, the incapacitated King George III.

The main concern of the monarchy at this time was to underline both the stability of the ever-growing British Empire and the continuity of the line of succession. The new king was naturally prone to the magnificent; he had a taste for luxury and grandiosity that he chose to adopt both in public functions and in his private life to differentiate and to surpass himself from his impaired father.

On the day of his coronation, 19th July 1821, the national sentiment of gratitude towards the new king was honoured with the presentation of a number of special objects in celebration of his power, his erudite taste and the importance of his role.

The object that was chosen to mark the occasion would go on to be lauded by historians, artists and influential personalities of the period. The Shield of Achilles lent itself perfectly to the task. Indeed the most important artists and intellectuals of the time were involved in the ambitious project, working relentlessly to produce the finest and most spectacular object ever made.

It was a chance to demonstrate the excellence of British craftsmanship, erudition, power and financial resources and the final outcome did not disappoint.

The Shield of Achilles is amongst the great masterpieces of art history and not just for its artistic value. It provides material evidence of the historical times both in its theoretical conception and in its physical making. It tells us the story of the relationships between some of the most influential art-makers of the Georgian period, who would shape art history and culture in the years to come.

THE KING OF HANOVER’S SHIELD
OF ACHILLES

Silver-gilt
London, Sterling standard, 1823
Maker’s mark of Philip Rundell for Rundell, Bridge & Rundell
Diameter: 35 ¾ in (89.7 cm)
Weight: 723 oz (22,490 g)

The circular shield is cast and chased after the design by John Flaxman with scenes from the eighteenth book of Homer’s Iliad.

The central element with the chariot of the Sun, surrounded by the constellations. On the border scenes depicting: the marriage procession and banquet, the quarrel and judicial appeal, the siege and the ambushade, the harvest field, the vintage, shepherds defending their flocks, the Cretan dance. The external border with marine waves.

The reverse has four rings at the rim and centre for attaching leather straps. Engraved on the reverse with the cypher and coat of arms for Ernest Augustus King of Hanover and with the inscription: "THE SHIELD OF ACHILLES/ DESIGNED AND MODELLED BY THE LATE/ JOHN FLAXMAN R.A./ EXECUTED AND PUBLISED BY RUNDELL BRIDGE AND CO./ LONDON 1838".

PROVENANCE:
Ernest Augustus Duke of Cumberland and King of Hanover (1771-1851); thence by descent in the Hanoverian royal family until sold, probably in 1923.
Josef van Mierlo, circa 1940 and thence by descent in the van Mierlo family, Essen, Belgium.
Sotheby’s London, 2007.
Koopman Rare Art.
Private Collection.

“Then first he form’d the immense and solid shield;
Rich various artifice emblazed the field;
Its utmost verge a threefold circle bound;
A silver chain suspends the massy round;
Five ample plates the broad expanse compose,
And godlike labours on the surface rose.”



Only five examples of the shield were made in gilt silver.

After the first version of the shield was sold to the Prince Regent, who displayed it at his Coronation banquet, an order followed from his brother, the Duke of York, another keen collector and a great patron of the silver trade.

These first two shields were both marked by Philip Rundell and hallmarked 1821-22. One year later, two more were produced and sold to the Duke of Northumberland and the Earl of Lonsdale respectively. Both are hallmarked 1822-23.

The history of the present shield, the fifth one in chronological order, reveals a peculiar episode of rediscovery which makes it an unique object.

It was hallmarked 1823-24 and was sold to Ernest Augustus, Duke of Cumberland and King of Hanover, fifth son of George III.

When Ludwig Schorn, a German scholar, visited the premises of the workshop of Rundell, Bridge and Rundell in 1826, he describes this shield, confusing it with one of the previous ones, which were already within the collections of their respective owners by this time.

In 1911, E. Alfred Jones, the then curator of the Royal Collection, mentions this very shield amongst the various pieces of plate that he was able to personally inspect on his visit to Austria. The inscription on the back of this shield clearly states this royal provenance together with the year of

1838, the first in Ernest Augustus' reign as King of Hanover. It seems therefore plausible that this shield was originally cast without any specific client in mind, but simply to be displayed in Rundell, Bridge and Rundell's premises as publicity, and in celebration of their most magnificent piece. In the year 1838, a large quantity of silver objects were acquired by the King of Hanover along with this shield. A possible explanation for the acquisition of this piece could be the desire of Ernest Augustus to replace the one that his brother, the Duke of York, brought to Hanover during his Regency and then took back to England with him upon the termination of his duty in 1837, when his brother was crowned King.

From 1714 to 1837, in fact, the throne of Hanover was joined with the United Kingdom, which terminated upon the accession in Britain of Queen Victoria, as under the Salic law of succession, a woman could not rule if there was a male descendant. The crown was therefore inherited by her eldest uncle, Prince Ernst Augustus, Duke of Cumberland and King of Hanover, who reigned until his death in 1851. His son King George V of Hanover (r.1851-1866, d.1878) succeeded him but was deposed during the Seven Weeks War in 1866.

A photo in the Hanoverian royal display in Vienna shows this shield in situ amongst many other Regency pieces in 1868, for the Silver Anniversary of King George V and Queen Mary, but it is quite challenging to reconstruct its movements after that date. Following the deposition, the Duke of Cumberland and his descendants, retired to a more modest life and, in 1923, the majority of the Cumberland historic plate was eventually consigned to be sold by several German and British dealers.



Ernest Augustus, King of Hanover, Duke of Cumberland by Edmund Koken, circa 1842



Hanoverian Royal Plate on display in Vienna, 18 February 1868, the Silver Wedding Anniversary of King George V and Queen Mary. The King of Hanovers' shield can be seen in the centre of the right hand alcove of the buffet display.

Image courtesy of Historisches Museum Hanover

THE ROYAL ASSOCIATION WITH RUNDELL, BRIDGE AND RUNDELL AND THE ROLE OF SILVER IN REGENCY BRITAIN

The history of high quality decorative objects is always associated with the preoccupations of their patrons.

When examining the so-called Regency period, it is necessary to specify the exact time frame. Even though the young Prince of Wales, George Augustus Frederick, enjoyed only ten years as a Regent, the main prerequisites, that led to the development of the style, had emerged at the end of the XVIII century. In the same way, the legacy of Regency grandeur was to influence the decades that followed.

The early part of the XIX century was a period of relative financial well-being and serenity for the upper and middle classes, with the sufferings and deprivations of the Napoleonic wars far removed from the country. The industrial revolution began in the early 1800s, making life easier, and safer, with progress and modern inventions. Increasing wealth stimulated population growth, boosting the demand for agriculture and goods. All of this wealth passed to the upper class that formed the majority of the British economy: landowners saw their assets grow tremendously in value in terms of profitable rentals. As a result the middle classes became a new category of consumers with access to a wider variety of goods that included silverware, which was produced using modern techniques and was much cheaper to buy than previously.

Important silver commissions occupied a crucial place in Regency society since the Prince Regent was an avid collector. “For George IV kingship and collecting were inextricably linked... George IV saw himself as an embodiment of a Britain proudly standing at the heart of European affairs. Casting himself in the role of creator of the alliance that vanquished Napoleon, he sought to surround himself in an aura of golden

splendour, and, like Napoleon, he strove to recreate the magnificence of imperial Rome. His purchases of gold and silver from Rundell’s were crucial to the elaboration of this image.”²

Undoubtedly considered the most prestigious London firm of silversmiths, Rundell, Bridge and Rundell was founded in 1767, when Philip Rundell becomes a partner in the distinguished workshop of Henry Hurt and William Pickett. He is joined by John Bridge in 1785. The firm gains important status when King George III appoints them as royal goldsmiths in 1804. The following year, Rundell’s nephew, Edmund Waller Rundell, also joins the partnership and the firm reaches the apex of its success. The Prince Regent permits them to use the royal warrant, which becomes the company’s best promotional asset. It was then that the firm began stamping its pieces with the royal retailers’ mark, *Aurifices Regis et Principi Walliae Londini Fecerunt*, to underline their close and privileged relationship with the royal household. Their workforce of artisans also reached the milestone of one thousand.

The fortune of the firm follows the economic circumstances of the period.

Aside from the florid agricultural and industrial setting, London was also emerging as a financial centre for tertiary services, creating professional figures who acquired a similar social status to the aristocracy and became clients of the luxury market in their own right.

The success of Rundell, Bridge and Rundell lies in the fact that they were able to perfectly absorb the methods of industrialisation, such as the division of labour, and succeeded in applying its principles whilst maintaining extraordinary quality. When they were officially invested with royal

patronage, the volume of work was so consistent that they had to adapt with new distribution methods for work and production. In a revolutionary way for its time, they had the foresight to understand the possibility of adapting industrial methods to artisan work by distributing work and using subcontractors and one-off designers.

Celebrated sculptors and designers were employed, of the likes of Jean Jaques Boileau, William Theed II and John Flaxman. The actual production of silver plate was subcontracted to makers such as Paul Storr or Benjamin Smith who, in turn, administered proper factories (which in turn operated with relatively small, manageable teams) with many silversmiths working under their strict control.

Philip Rundell, who is remembered as the strongest character in the firm³, also had the innovative idea of hiring out plate for occasions, a practice that ensured a broader circulation of their objects and thus much publicity. Another innovation was the application of credit options, an extremely popular solution for members of the royal household as well.

A further element that helps the modern observer to understand the firm’s fortune was the fact that they had agents in many parts of the world in the large British colonies, in order to permit regular orders or special commissions from dignitaries residing abroad.

In the Regency period the custom of presentation gifts in the form of precious metal plate reached its height due to the renewed patriotic enthusiasm for the status of Britain as a sovereign eminent nation.

The high rank in society and the wealth of their clientele made it possible for Rundell, Bridge and Rundell to maintain excellent craftsmanship at every stage of production. Most importantly, they were able to present their clients with a wide variety of styles, indulging in the rich eclecticism that became the main feature of the Regency style. Customers could choose between the stylistic devices of bold and restrained neoclassicism, the historically identifiable gothic revival or the whimsical and ornate rococo revival.

These stylistic solutions might seem deeply contrasting but they must be seen against the backdrop of the political preoccupations of the period.

When the Prince of Wales was nominated Regent for the kingdom, he immediately wanted to distance himself from his father’s moderation. It was crucial to the young prince to present the country as a colonial and military power and this preoccupation furthered his desire to impress. He was an eclectic accumulator with a strong ambition to be remembered as the embodiment of a golden era of success and prosperity for his nation.



A George IV Portrait Snuff Box, London 1814, Rundell, Bridge and Rundell. Koopman Rare Art



A Dreamer, Satirical etching of George III asleep in a chair, his foot gouty and a print screen behind him, while his crown falls off into the hands of his son. William McCleary, c.1805. © Trustees of the British Museum

The principal and more evident inspiration behind Rundell, Bridge and Rundell's production is the elaboration of classical motifs. The classical revival is not a trend that is new to the Regency period as the arts often reverted to it as a source of purity, elegance and order. Examples can be traced back to medieval art, when the smooth draperies in holy images replaced the static nature of the Byzantine ones. In Renaissance times, the classical approach to representing nature was admired and reproduced in friezes and decorative elements and the neoclassical movement in the XVIII century encouraged artists, architects and designers to reproduce classical elements in every possible combination.

The innovation that accompanies the Regency approach to classicism is the violent rejection of the affected element that characterised early English neoclassicism. In 1806, the architect Charles Heathcote Tatham published his "Design for

ornamental plate", expressing harsh views on the Adam style that had already been criticised by the King himself in 1800⁴. His publication is the first book of English designs especially for silver plate as opposed to those intended for more general use in which he complained that "instead of Massiveness, that is the principal characteristic of good plate, light and insignificant forms have prevailed, to the utter exclusion of all good ornament". The evolution towards grander and more monumental plate was in perfect harmony with the needs of the nation at the time.

At the end of the Napoleonic wars, Britain was the de facto leading world power. Even if the colonies in North America were lost in the War of Independence, new colonies in Canada, India, Australia and Africa retained British prestige. It was necessary to reorganise the vast empire and subject these territories to more direct imperial control from London.

It was therefore necessary to carry on with the baroque tradition of equipping ambassadors with a huge quantity of silver plate to impress and to publicise Britain's status in the world.

The ideal method of representing and supporting the self-confidence and self-awareness of the British nation came from a more direct observation of archaeology. Napoleon's campaigns brought a vast number of both objects and sketches to Europe. The work of Piranesi was studied in depth, once again trying to draw the eye away from the naïve element that characterised the earlier Adamesque approach. Even classical poems such as *The Iliad* or *The Odyssey* were studied and their *ekphrasis* reproduced in precious objects. Other evidences such as the travel journals of Grand Tour goers, were a fount of inspiration when it came to the ideal symbolism to underline military success and power.

Alongside the classical inspirations a wider variety of sources can be identified. When, in 1783, the future Prince Regent decided to renew the interiors of Carlton House, a restrained Louis XVI style was chosen as it was felt to be appropriately discreet and dignified. It was another way of referencing the French style but the inspirations for silverware came from even earlier periods, embracing the capricious designs of the rococo style.

It is true that, just like the classical inspiration, rococo had never quite gone out of fashion. The trend for collecting baroque and rococo objects was boosted by the quantity of material coming to the market from France following the revolution when many members of the aristocracy commissioned contemporary makers to design pieces to



Watercolour of 32 Ludgate Hill, London, The Shop of Rundell, Bridge and Rundell Jewellers, 1826 by John Clement Meade

complete the collections they acquired. This desire to complete existing services does not fully explain the deep admiration that the Regency period showed to the great makers of previous times, from Sprimont to Crespin. In 1826, as an example, Rundell, Bridge and Rundell were commissioned to make “improvements” to the Neptune centrepiece of 1741. The result is an extremely heavy object that somehow is still full of movement in its horizontal structure.

It is quite interesting that the marine theme in general is a common characteristic of both the classical and rococo style. The recurrence of such a theme echoes the conflicts with France over naval supremacy that makes a propitiatory appearance as a decorative element in silver objects.

The original and eclectic taste of George IV included another trend that exerted great influence over the Regency silver production: the gothic revival.

This antiquarian trend is once again connected with the importance for the monarch to present himself as a man of knowledge and culture, in line with the Renaissance tradition of the erudite sovereign. The gothic style, believed to be the original Anglo Saxon style of decoration, is seen as a pure form of paying homage to British heritage during the Regency period.



A George IV Wine Cooler, London 1827, Paul Storr. *Koopman Rare Art*



The Neptune Centrepiece, London 1741, Nicholas Sprimont. The hippocamp base was added by Rundell, Bridge and Rundell for George IV, 1827. ©The Royal Collection RCIN 50282

THE SHIELD OF ACHILLES: GENESIS, SOURCES AND STAGES

The choice of paying homage to the newly invested king with a material representation of the Shield of Achilles is an extremely interesting testimony of the historical scenario.

The Iliad is an epic poem written around the VIII century BC by the Greek poet Homer, which recounts some of the significant events of the final weeks of the legendary war that happened in Troy (whose original name was *Ilium*, hence *Iliad*), that took place around the XII century BC.

Homer's second poem, *The Odyssey*, tells the story of the complex journey of King Odysseus from Troy where he fought in battle, back to his native island of Ithaca to be reunited with his family and his people.

*"The wrath of Peleus' son, the direful spring
Of all the Grecian woes, O goddess sing!"*

Tradition attributes both poems to Homer, who, according to *The Iliad's* incipit verses, writes about the events directly inspired by the divine muse of literature.

In truth, the Homeric question constantly sparks debate amongst scholars as the existence of Homer has been questioned ever since the poems began to circulate in the classical world.

The most accepted theory is that both poems were compiled by a writer who collected the legends and anecdotes that travelling storytellers, or *aoidos*, used to recite in public.



Thetis dipping Achilles in the River Styx, Thomas Banks RA, 1798.
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London A.101:1-1937

Achilles is described as the greatest warrior that ever existed. He was a demigod, born from the matrimony of the nymph Thetis and the mortal king Peleus and, as such, his whole body was invulnerable to wounds apart from the heel his mother failed to immerse in the legendary Styx river.

His most loyal friend (and possibly lover) Patroclus is killed by Hector in battle and the hero, Achilles, needs a new set of arms and armour to avenge the death of his beloved comrade.

His mother, Thetis, although afflicted by the sorrow of her son's mortal danger, understands his hunger for revenge and honour and prays to Hephaestus, the god of fire, to "*Grace with immortal arms this short-lived son, And to the field in martial pomp restore, To shine with glory, till he shines no more!*".

Hephaestus promises to forge a shield so incredible that it will incite envy and fear on the battlefield, an object invested with such force that it is almost supernatural and will be "*the world's amaze*".

What follows in the poem is one of the most famous excerpts in the history of literature, lines with such a powerful and evocative energy that they will leave an indelible mark on art and culture for millennia to come.

The verbal (and written) description of a visual work of art, such as a painting, a sculpture or a building, is known as *ekphrasis* and it was a common literary genre in the classical period.

During the neoclassical revival, the tradition is rekindled; a famous modern example is the *Ode on a Grecian Urn* by the neoclassical poet John Keats.

In the context of early Greek poetry in which *The Iliad's* description of the shield is inscribed, the use of an *ekphrasis* within a text fulfils the crucial function of helping the reader to understand the magnificence of this legendary object and the awe it was meant to inspire towards the hero Achilles.

In other words, it is inserted in a text to guide the reader's perception and to help them empathise with the message that the work of art is intended to convey.

Rundell, Bridge and Rundell's iconic Theocritus Cup is another example of this process. Based on a description in the first idyll of Theocritus, the cup was first made in 1811-12 by Paul Storr. In his poem, Theocritus describes the cup as a prize to be won in a poetry competition between a shepherd and a goatherder and the intricate details inspired Flaxman to design a similar object.



A George IV Theocritus Cup Wine Cooler, London 1822,
Philip Rundell. *Koopman Rare Art*

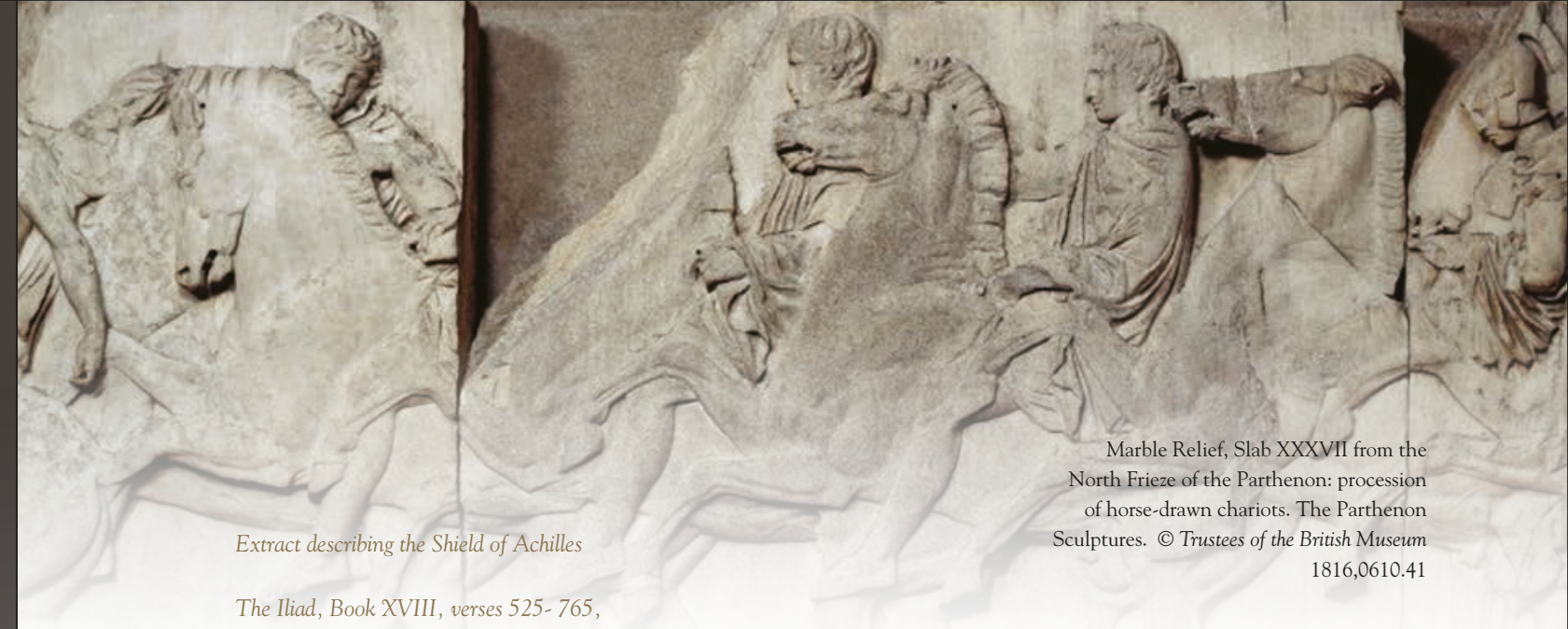
Were you to sing
 As when you sang contesting Chromis, Libya-born,
 Then I'll give you a goat who bore twins thrice to milk,
 Which, having two kids, milks enough for two whole pails,
 Withal a deep, robust cup, wiped with pleasant wax,
 Two-handled, newly-carved, still smelling of the knife.
 Around its edges ivy winds itself above,
 The ivy intertwined with marigold. Along
 Its sides the spiral clasps, adorned with yellow fruit.
 Inside some work of heaven's made, a woman decked
 In both a robe and circlet. Next to her
 Two nobly long-haired men in turns, from this to that,
 Dispute with words, nor do their words affect her heart.
 Though sometimes she acknowledges one laughingly,
 At other times she states her mind again; they long
 Endure in vain eyes dark and sleepless from desire.
 Behind them there are carved both elder fisherman
 And ragged rock, on which th' old man in haste draws back
 Great net to cast, like him who toils with force severe.
 You'd think he fishes with all his limbs' strength,
 So fully swell the tendons all around his neck,
 Though being quite grisly. His strength's rival to a youth's.
 And hardly far from th' ocean-worn old man
 An orchard's well weighed down with ripened grapes,
 Which some small lad defends, he sitting on
 Stone walls. Beside him are two foxes, one frequents
 The vine-rows, plund'ring grapes; the other says,
 While wholly making scheme about his pouch, she'll not
 Leave this young lad until she drains his breakfast dry.
 But he with daffodils weaves a fine locust-trap,
 Affixing rushes, and he's not so mindful of
 His wallet or fields as amused with weaving-work.
 The soft acanthus crusts on all sides 'round the cup,
 A glitt'ring wonder. Thing could frighten you at heart.

A design by Flaxman in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum⁵, dated circa 1810 shows the cup in the form of a wine cooler, even though the twisted ivy handles that characterise the cup in the description are missing.

The figure composition on this side of the cup is believed to have been inspired by a relief in Villa Albani showing Hermes, Eurydice and Orpheus. A drawing in the British Museum⁶ shows the other half of the cup, with a fisherman hauling up a net, and a boy sitting under a vine. Also in the British Museum is a print of the whole cup made as a pattern to promote its production⁷.

Several examples of the Theocritus Cup were produced as wine coolers and the success of this model, thanks to its erudite inspiration, made it one of the most iconic and recognisable pieces of Regency plate retailed by Rundell, Bridge and Rundell.





Marble Relief, Slab XXXVII from the North Frieze of the Parthenon: procession of horse-drawn chariots. The Parthenon Sculptures. © Trustees of the British Museum 1816,0610.41

Extract describing the Shield of Achilles

The Iliad, Book XVIII, verses 525- 765, translated by Alexander Pope.

"Thee, welcome, goddess! what occasion calls
(So long a stranger) to these honour'd walls?
'Tis thine, fair Thetis, the command to lay,
And Vulcan's joy and duty to obey."

To whom the mournful mother thus replies:
(The crystal drops stood trembling in her eyes:)
"O Vulcan! say, was ever breast divine
So pierced with sorrows, so o'erwhelm'd as mine?
Of all the goddesses, did Jove prepare
For Thetis only such a weight of care?
I, only I, of all the watery race
By force subjected to a man's embrace,
Who, sinking now with age and sorrow, pays
The mighty fine imposed on length of days.
Sprung from my bed, a godlike hero came,
The bravest sure that ever bore the name;
Like some fair plant beneath my careful hand
He grew, he flourish'd, and he graced the land:
To Troy I sent him! but his native shore
Never, ah never, shall receive him more;
(Even while he lives, he wastes with secret woe;)
Nor I, a goddess, can retard the blow!
Robb'd of the prize the Grecian suffrage gave,
The king of nations forced his royal slave:
For this he grieved; and, till the Greeks oppress'd
Required his arm, he sorrow'd unredress'd.
Large gifts they promise, and their elders send;
In vain--he arms not, but permits his friend
His arms, his steeds, his forces to employ:
He marches, combats, almost conquers Troy:
Then slain by Phoebus (Hector had the name)
At once resigns his armour, life, and fame.
But thou, in pity, by my prayer be won:
Grace with immortal arms this short-lived son,
And to the field in martial pomp restore,
To shine with glory, till he shines no more!"

To her the artist-god: "Thy griefs resign,
Secure, what Vulcan can, is ever thine.
O could I hide him from the Fates, as well,
Or with these hands the cruel stroke repel,
As I shall forge most envied arms, the gaze
Of wondering ages, and the world's amaze!"

Thus having said, the father of the fires
To the black labours of his forge retires.
Soon as he bade them blow, the bellows turn'd
Their iron mouths; and where the furnace burn'd,
Resounding breathed: at once the blast expires,
And twenty forges catch at once the fires;
Just as the god directs, now loud, now low,
They raise a tempest, or they gently blow;
In hissing flames huge silver bars are roll'd,
And stubborn brass, and tin, and solid gold;
Before, deep fix'd, the eternal anvils stand;
The ponderous hammer loads his better hand,
His left with tongs turns the vex'd metal round,
And thick, strong strokes, the doubling vaults rebound.

Then first he form'd the immense and solid shield;
Rich various artifice emblaz'd the field;
Its utmost verge a threefold circle bound;
A silver chain suspends the massy round;
Five ample plates the broad expanse compose,
And godlike labours on the surface rose.
There shone the image of the master-mind:
There earth, there heaven, there ocean he design'd;
The unwearied sun, the moon completely round;
The starry lights that heaven's high convex crown'd;
The Pleiads, Hyads, with the northern team;
And great Orion's more refulgent beam;
To which, around the axle of the sky,
The Bear, revolving, points his golden eye,
Still shines exalted on the ethereal plain,
Nor bathes his blazing forehead in the main.



Two cities radiant on the shield appear,
The image one of peace, and one of war.
Here sacred pomp and genial feast delight,
And solemn dance, and hymeneal rite;
Along the street the new-made brides are led,
With torches flaming, to the nuptial bed:
The youthful dancers in a circle bound
To the soft flute, and cithern's silver sound:
Through the fair streets the matrons in a row
Stand in their porches, and enjoy the show.

There in the forum swarm a numerous train;
The subject of debate, a townsman slain:
One pleads the fine discharged, which one denied,
And bade the public and the laws decide:
The witness is produced on either hand:
For this, or that, the partial people stand:
The appointed heralds still the noisy bands,
And form a ring, with sceptres in their hands:
On seats of stone, within the sacred place,
The reverend elders nodded o'er the case;
Alternate, each the attesting sceptre took,
And rising solemn, each his sentence spoke
Two golden talents lay amidst, in sight,
The prize of him who best adjudged the right.

Another part (a prospect differing far)
Glow'd with refulgent arms, and horrid war.
Two mighty hosts a leaguer'd town embrace,
And one would pillage, one would burn the place.
Meantime the townsmen, arm'd with silent care,
A secret ambush on the foe prepare:
Their wives, their children, and the watchful band
Of trembling parents, on the turrets stand.
They march; by Pallas and by Mars made bold:
Gold were the gods, their radiant garments gold,
And gold their armour: these the squadron led,
August, divine, superior by the head!
A place for ambush fit they found, and stood,
Cover'd with shields, beside a silver flood.
Two spies at distance lurk, and watchful seem

If sheep or oxen seek the winding stream.
Soon the white flocks proceeded o'er the plains,
And steers slow-moving, and two shepherd swains;
Behind them piping on their reeds they go,
Nor fear an ambush, nor suspect a foe.
In arms the glittering squadron rising round
Rush sudden; hills of slaughter heap the ground;
Whole flocks and herds lie bleeding on the plains,
And, all amidst them, dead, the shepherd swains!
The bellowing oxen the besiegers hear;
They rise, take horse, approach, and meet the war,
They fight, they fall, beside the silver flood;
The waving silver seem'd to blush with blood.
There Tumult, there Contention stood confess'd;
One rear'd a dagger at a captive's breast;
One held a living foe, that freshly bled
With new-made wounds; another dragg'd a dead;
Now here, now there, the carcases they tore:
Fate stalk'd amidst them, grim with human gore.
And the whole war came out, and met the eye;
And each bold figure seem'd to live or die.

A field deep furrow'd next the god design'd,
The third time labour'd by the sweating hind;
The shining shares full many ploughmen guide,
And turn their crooked yokes on every side.
Still as at either end they wheel around,
The master meets them with his goblet crown'd;
The hearty draught rewards, renews their toil,
Then back the turning ploughshares cleave the soil:
Behind, the rising earth in ridges roll'd;
And sable look'd, though form'd of molten gold.

Another field rose high with waving grain;
With bended sickles stand the reaper train:
Here stretched in ranks the levell'd swarths are found,
Sheaves heap'd on sheaves here thicken up the ground.
With sweeping stroke the mowers strow the lands;
The gatherers follow, and collect in bands;
And last the children, in whose arms are borne
(Too short to gripe them) the brown sheaves of corn.

The rustic monarch of the field describes,
With silent glee, the heaps around him rise.
A ready banquet on the turf is laid,
Beneath an ample oak's expanded shade.
The victim ox the sturdy youth prepare;
The reaper's due repast, the woman's care.

Next, ripe in yellow gold, a vineyard shines,
Bent with the ponderous harvest of its vines;
A deeper dye the dangling clusters show,
And curl'd on silver props, in order glow:
A darker metal mix'd intrench'd the place;
And pales of glittering tin the inclosure grace.
To this, one pathway gently winding leads,
Where march a train with baskets on their heads,
(Fair maids and blooming youths,) that smiling bear
The purple product of the autumnal year.
To these a youth awakes the warbling strings,
Whose tender lay the fate of Linus sings;
In measured dance behind him move the train,
Tune soft the voice, and answer to the strain.

Here herds of oxen march, erect and bold,
Rear high their horns, and seem to low in gold,
And speed to meadows on whose sounding shores
A rapid torrent through the rushes roars:
Four golden herdsmen as their guardians stand,
And nine sour dogs complete the rustic band.
Two lions rushing from the wood appear'd;
And seized a bull, the master of the herd:
He roar'd: in vain the dogs, the men withstood;
They tore his flesh, and drank his sable blood.
The dogs (oft cheer'd in vain) desert the prey,
Dread the grim terrors, and at distance bay.

Next this, the eye the art of Vulcan leads
Deep through fair forests, and a length of meads,
And stalls, and folds, and scatter'd cots between;
And fleecy flocks, that whiten all the scene.

A figured dance succeeds; such once was seen
In lofty Gnossus for the Cretan queen,
Form'd by Daedalean art; a comely band
Of youths and maidens, bounding hand in hand.
The maids in soft simars of linen dress'd;
The youths all graceful in the glossy vest:
Of those the locks with flowery wreath inroll'd;
Of these the sides adorn'd with swords of gold,
That glittering gay, from silver belts depend.
Now all at once they rise, at once descend,
With well-taught feet: now shape in oblique ways,
Confusedly regular, the moving maze:
Now forth at once, too swift for sight, they spring,
And undistinguish'd blend the flying ring:
So whirls a wheel, in giddy circle toss'd,
And, rapid as it runs, the single spokes are lost.
The gazing multitudes admire around:
Two active tumblers in the centre bound;
Now high, now low, their pliant limbs they bend:
And general songs the sprightly revel end.

Thus the broad shield complete the artist crown'd
With his last hand, and pour'd the ocean round:
In living silver seem'd the waves to roll,
And beat the buckler's verge, and bound the whole.

This done, whate'er a warrior's use requires
He forged; the cuirass that outshone the fires,
The greaves of ductile tin, the helm impress'd
With various sculpture, and the golden crest.
At Thetis' feet the finished labour lay:
She, as a falcon cuts the aerial way,
Swift from Olympus' snowy summit flies,
And bears the blazing present through the skies.

It is very challenging for us now to fully understand the impact of such a powerful description in those days. Constantly immersed as we are in reproduced images, we cannot possibly relate to the visual perception that characterised life in past centuries or millennia.

The peculiarity of the shield’s description in *The Iliad*, which has appealed and fascinated for thousands of years, lies in the fact that Homeric poems were considered to have a divine inspiration as their source. Archaic Greek tradition depicts Homer as a blind man, but modern critics established that this belief is nothing but a conventional symbol of the divination of which the text was capable. The writer of such texts was believed to be writing as a psychic, acting as a channel through which mankind could be educated.

The other peculiar thing about the shield’s description is the fact that it illustrates a narrative rather than a series of stills. The events are indeed contained in the physical form of a round disc of metal, divided into sections and friezes, but they are described as moving kinetic images, giving life to a meta textual history that is taking place alongside the events on the battlefield.

Classical historians have also identified another crucial aspect that makes this passage of fundamental historical interest⁸: the fact that the scenes listed by Homer on the shield outline the whole of human life. The entire system of values of the Greek

polis is summarised by the actions that take place in the two imaginary cities that Homer describes. Marital love is the first concept to be presented, as the foundation of society, followed by law, represented by the elders in the *forum*. The human instinct towards war occupies a prominent part of the shield, with agriculture presented as another pillar of both urban and rural society. Loyalty and gratitude towards the divine element conclude the circle of life, illustrated by the sacrifice scene where two youths prepare an ox for the banquet.

The incredible complexity of this description must have been fascinating in antiquity and it inspired artists to produce similarly intricate pieces of art associated with military subjects or godly triumphs.

It is not surprising that the neoclassical period chooses Homer’s poems as a literary and artistic source. We know that for a period of approximately 100 years, there was a movement to which artists subscribed with an enormous and almost ethical passion that dominated the arts of the western world. The neoclassical style typified the culture of a period during which mankind deliberately looked to rediscover the values of classical art in all its forms: from architecture to poetry as well as visual and decorative arts.

The main attraction for the artists and theorists of the Georgian period was the fact that classical architecture cannot be separated from the order and discipline it inspires.



Part of the Final Lines of Achilles’ Lament for his Friend Patroclus in Book XIX of the Iliad, Alexander Pope 1712-24.
© The British Library MS 4808

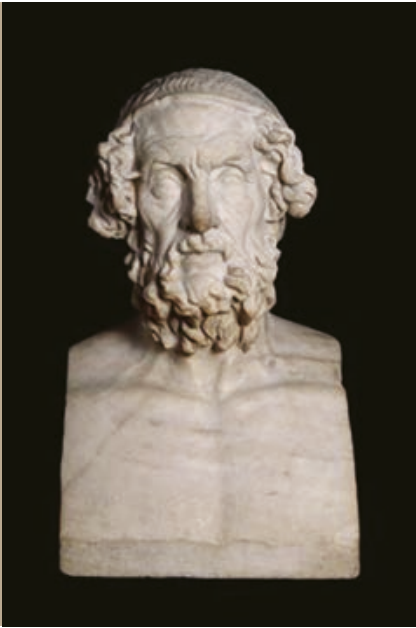
This interest for classical-inspired objects (and the spirit they engendered) began to spread gradually across Europe and even Homer’s poems were translated, studied and discussed by great intellectuals.

The British Library holds in its collection a very interesting manuscript of the first draft of Alexander Pope’s 1720 translation⁹ of *The Iliad*. The manuscript shows a sketched depiction of the shield that Pope must have produced while working on the original Greek text in order to better understand the decorative scheme of the complex object he was describing.

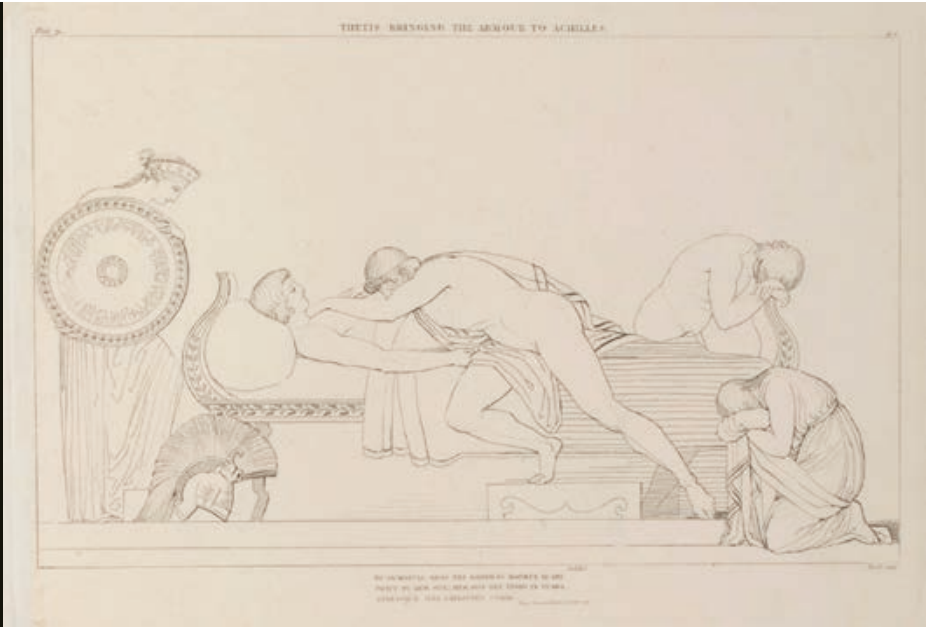
It is interesting to see how neatly he demarcates the different scenes as separate narratives. He adopts letters to facilitate comprehension of the decoration but also adds functional details, such as the three metal rings to carry the shield or the indication “convex and spherical” in regard to the central disc with the celestial globe, bringing the mythological object back to a tangible human dimension.

When the artist John Flaxman was asked in 1792 by two of his English patrons he met in Rome to produce illustrations for *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, he embraced the task enthusiastically, producing a large number of sketches and ideas he was to include in later compositions.

He decides to incorporate the Shield of Achilles into the scene depicting the mourning over Patroclus, with Thetis presenting the object to her devastated son. This must have been the first time that he conceived of the idea of giving life in a visual form to the monumental shield described in the poem’s ekphrasis. This drawing already reveals a number of interesting details about Flaxman’s ideas. The nymph Thetis, who appears on the side, has just arrived to join a group of grieving figures. Her left foot is raised to indicate the movement she has just completed, a conventional stratagem common in classical art, but also to underline the weight of the disc she is carrying. Her hands and arms embrace the shield in a gesture that conceals another conventional topos: the image of a mother that knows her child is predestined by divine forces to immolation. In this particular case, Thetis is carrying the set of armour that her son will be killed in after the duel with Hector, and her gesture of presenting the shield but holding on to it at the same time, carries the same melancholic significance that is common in late medieval and Renaissance representations of the Virgin Mary, where the Mother holds the infant Jesus in her arms in a gesture that seems to offer the child for future sacrifice but at the same time transmits reluctance and grief.



Marble Terminal Portrait Bust of the Blind Poet Homer. © Trustees of the British Museum, 1805,0703.85



Thetis Bringing the Armour to Achilles, The Iliad of Homer engraved from the Compositions of John Flaxman R.A., Sculptor, London 1805. © Royal Academy of Arts 18/305

THE ROYAL BUFFET DISPLAY OF PLATE

In the Georgian period, in line with the buffet display custom, a large ewer and basin (or dish) was part of any formal banquet. The coronation banquet of George IV took place in a very spectacular manner.

A watercolour in the Royal Collection¹⁰ by the royal artist Denis Dighton, shows a view of Westminster Hall on the day of the coronation. The king sits in the centre of the honour table raised at the head of the room, surrounded by a number of vessels, amongst which are the shield and several ewer and basins that sit on draped shelves.

The creation of an imposing and spectacular object seemed appropriate to mark the occasion and the royal silversmiths decided to charge the most prestigious artist of the times with this grand task.

Flaxman's and Rundell's choice to produce a silver gilt version of the Shield of Achilles is not surprising, for a number of reasons.

As mentioned, it was an idea that Flaxman had had in mind for some time. As the classical Homeric poems were studied and examined, every erudite of the time must have been familiar with the incredible description of this object and, even though no artist had yet attempted to reproduce it in physical form, it was popular to compare any figural dish to the mythical Achilles' Shield.

A crucial role in this event was the one played by the Lomellini basin and ewer. This set was made in 1623 by the Flemish goldsmith Giovanni Aelbosca Belga, who was working in Genoa between 1617 and 1638. The basin is decorated with embossed scenes depicting military triumphs of the original

patrons, the Grimaldi family. During the years of the Grand Tour, the set was bought, together with other objects, by the fifth Earl of Shaftesbury¹¹.

It is known that a cast of the admired Lomellini basin¹² was present in the workshop of Rundell, Bridge and Rundell at the time Flaxman embarked on the shield project. Later, the original service was brought to the workshop for repair and the artist was able to study the details and its structure in greater depth.

The presence of a big dish, or a shield in this case, was also integral to the plate that was traditionally presented during a royal or diplomatic investiture.

The tradition of the buffet display in England dates back to the XVI century, with sources describing the fine collection flaunted by Henry VIII. Hence, according to tradition, the buffet became an integral part of any room formally equipped for dining. The most important objects of a household were on display, but some were also functional, such as the ewer and basin for rinsing hands during the meal.

The buffet display went through a progressive transformation after 1700. When the *service à la française* gained importance the buffet became obsolete, as all vessels were presented to the guests directly on the dining table, with a complete dinner service being a spectacle in itself as a demonstration of ostentation, of personal wealth and taste.

It is however understandable that the ruling houses and their ambassadors, as well as some institutions linked to the Crown by ancient prestige or foundation, continued to adorn dining rooms with precious objects.



The Third and Last Challenge by the Champion during King George IV's Coronation Banquet in Westminster Hall, 1821.
©The Royal Collection RCIN 913630



Lomellini Ewer and Basin, Geonoo 1621-22.
© Victoria and Albert Museum M.11&A-1974

CREATING THE SHIELD

The complexity of the system operated by the retailers Rundell, Bridge and Rundell is told through the history of some of their most famed pieces of silver, such as the Shield of Achilles.

While developing the idea of making the shield, Rundell approaches Flaxman with an extremely flattering and reverential note, a move that reveals the nature of working relationships between directors, artists and designers. The firm recognised that their position at the top of the luxury retail market would only be respected by supplying the very best products and therefore it relied heavily on the prestige of well-known artists of the time.

A letter written by Rundell, Bridge and Rundell and addressed to Flaxman¹³ indicates that on 29th October 1810, Flaxman received the considerable sum of 100 guineas for the first design of the whole shield and a preliminary design for the external band of it, the one containing figural scenes, which is currently in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum¹⁴. The letter also illustrates the hierarchy of competences behind the project, with Wiliam Theed mentioned as a junior designer and modeller working under the supervision of Flaxman.



Detail section from drawing for the Border of the Shield of Achilles.
© The Victoria and Albert Museum E.1073-1980



Marble relief, Slab II from the West Frieze of the Parthenon: two horsemen. The Parthenon Sculptures. © Trustees of the British Museum 1816,0610.47



Detail section from drawing for the Border of the Shield of Achilles.
© The Victoria and Albert Museum E.1073-1980

This first design is divided into six different overlapping sections depicting the episodes narrated in the poem: the Cretan dance, the marriage procession, the argument, the judicial appeal, the siege and ambush, the tillage, the harvest field and the vintage. (See page 34 for full image)

Some scenes on the made shield differ from this initial idea, as Flaxman probably conceived the first design as a flat sheet and, as it became a curved surface, found that he had to manage the space and partitions in a different manner. The penultimate scene described by Homer, for example, depicting the herdsmen defending their bull from the lions, precedes the representation of the Cretan dance both in the poem and on the finished silver shield but does not appear on this first design and will only be conceived during a second stage.

During the eight years that followed the production of this first design, Flaxman was paid by Rundell for producing a total of twenty four more drawings and five models. It is also known that Rundell was personally involved in the decisions surrounding the iconography of the shield. In spite of his infamous lack of tolerance and bad disposition, he apparently endured frequent and extensive meetings with Flaxman during which they read Homer's verses to better understand the order of the scenes and their iconography.

This first design for the external border of the shield also reveals interesting clues about Flaxman's personality and taste.

The second scene enunciated in the *ekphrasis* takes place in a public forum, where the "Reverend Elders" are considering a dispute between two men that has divided the town. The elders are shown seated on the stone seats of the sacred area and Flaxman uses the device of inserting a curious object, a tripod burner, to mark the distinction between the sacred and



the mundane area of the forum. This object does not feature in the poem, but its presence reveals to observers something quite significant about Flaxman's work: the designer was aiming to speak to the educated and fashionable public that would have formed Rundell's clientele. Any person of taste and social status in those days would have immediately recognised a tripod burner as one of the most iconic classical shapes. Similar ones were amongst the recently excavated finds at the archaeological sites of Pompeii and Herculaneum, and its essential simplicity and elegance greatly inspired Georgian designers.

Flaxman ultimately abandoned this detail in the shield that was finally created, leaving the demarcation of the physical space of the forum to the high podium that the elders sit on, shaped as a barrel seat with curved sides.

Another detail that was abandoned is the character on horseback in the siege scene, whose sculptural torsion and proportions derive from the Parthenon friezes, a constant source of inspiration for Flaxman and his fellow Regency designers.

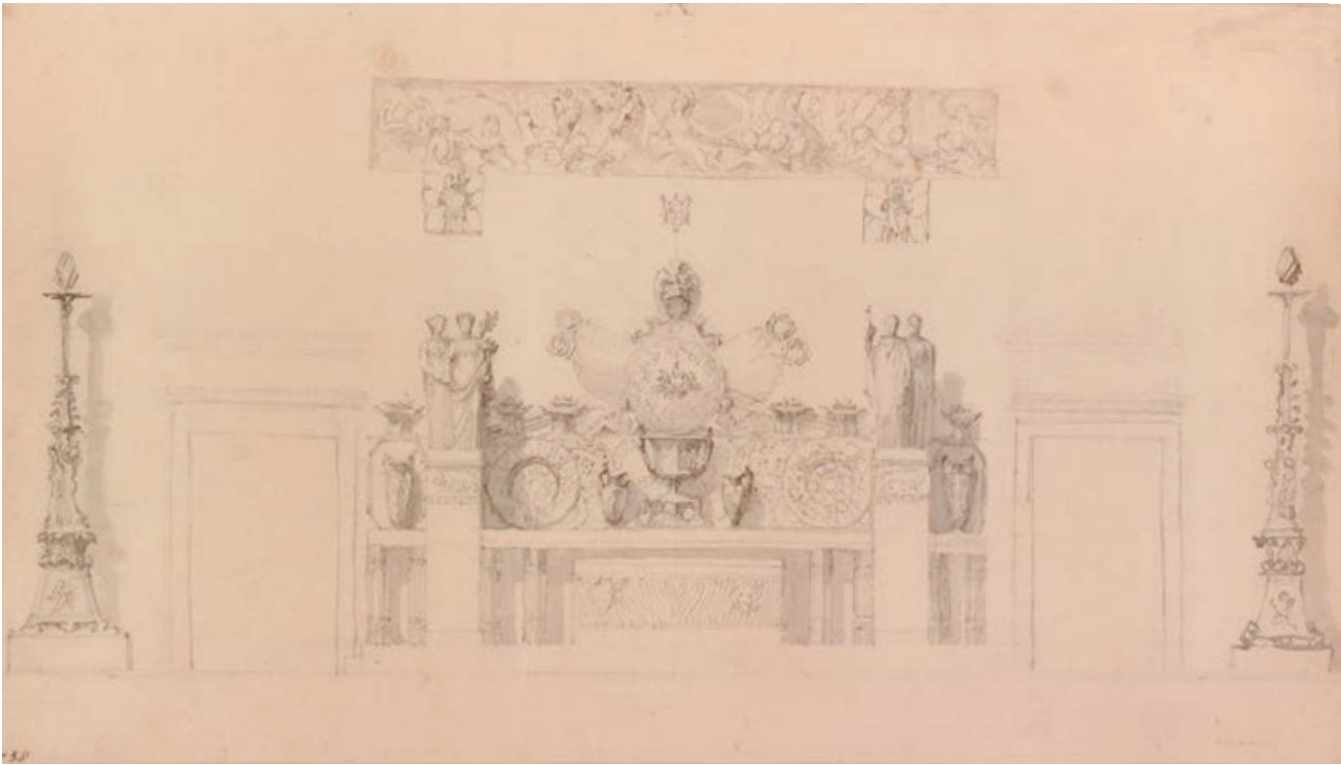
A second design in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum¹⁵ can be dated between 1814 and 1817 and shows a detail from the siege scene. The more precise composition indicates that this drawing belongs to a second stage of design, the same phase to which a group of sketches in the collection of the British Museum belongs¹⁶.

The designs in this group are attributable to the period during which Flaxman received from Rundell, Bridge and Rundell a second payment of £200 to continue the work he started in 1810.

In fact Rundell, Bridge & Rundell's main competitors at that time, the firm of Green, Ward & Green, started to circulate news of their production of the Wellington Shield, an impressively large charger in the shape of a shield commissioned by the City of London Bankers and Merchants to be presented to the Duke of Wellington. Flaxman's Shield of Achilles could well have been created with the idea of being presented to the Duke of Wellington, an idea that was maybe set aside for too long, giving their competitors a great chance. This event possibly pushed Flaxman and Rundell, Bridge and Rundell to pursue the project with renewed fervour and produce this second round of sketches and designs with the idea of creating the shield for another majestic occasion.

All of the designs in this second group are sketched details for the battle scene which, being the more complex one in terms of dynamic narrative, required Flaxman to make several attempts to evaluate the most suitable static pose for such an energetic and frantic scene. In fact the progressive research into the simplification and essentiality that will come to characterise the final shield, as opposed to the more narrative and solemn style that Flaxman initially conceived, was always a concern for the designer, as this tendency is also traceable in an early design for the scene of the marriage procession¹⁷, datable from the first phase.

Two designs from the second phase are also of particular interest in relation to the final outcome: the ones depicting the shield as a presentation display object¹⁸. The first could possibly be dated to 1818, the year in which Flaxman received a payment of £525 for the first model, cast in bronze and finished by the chaser William Pitts, and the second perhaps followed shortly after. They both portray the shield in the context of a military celebratory display, reinforcing the theory that its creation was with the Duke of Wellington's successes in mind, the second showing the piece presiding over the upper part of an important formal buffet display amongst other silver vessels closely related to the rest of the production of Rundell, Bridge and Rundell.



A Design for a Sideboard with Plate and Pair of Candelabra. © The Trustees of the British Museum 1900,0824.198





A Design for the Border of "The Shield of Achilles", John Flaxman circa 1818. The Battle. © Trustees of the British Museum 1862,0308.5

A drawing in a private collection might possibly be the only complete record of Flaxman's first design, dating from circa 1810. Given the rather simple execution, this drawing has been attributed to Flaxman's apprentice Edward Hodges Baily who, during those years, copied several of his master's designs to refine his rather rough hand and also to keep a record of the workshop's projects. The amount of detail that will later be omitted in the final shield underlines the fact that Flaxman is still struggling both to manage the space in the figural border and also to bring to life the central compartment depicting the sun (Apollo's chariot in his interpretation) surrounded by the sky (the starry lights and constellations in Homer's text and the zodiac signs in Flaxman's design).

As a general observation none of these original designs seem to differ from the final outcome in terms of the general composition of the scenes on the shield. The most significant alteration is the lack of those architectonic and decorative details that perhaps caused the designs for the first stage to appear more narrative and less dynamic and sculptural than the final Shield.

After a series of intervals that took place over nearly a decade, Flaxman received a final payment from Rundell, Bridge and Rundell on 20th January 1818 for the ultimate model of his masterpiece.

Five examples of the shield were made in gilt silver. The first two were sold to George IV¹⁹ and the Duke of York²⁰ respectively and are marked by Philip Rundell and hallmarked 1821-22.

The second two were sold to the Duke of Northumberland²¹ and to the Earl of Lonsdale²² and are hallmarked 1822-23.

The fifth Shield, the present one, is hallmarked 1823-24 and was sold to the Duke of Cumberland. It was also made in bronze and two of them were subsequently donated to the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, a significant gesture.

When the shield finally went into production and was presented to the Hall for marking, the name of Philip Rundell was chosen as the sponsor's, or maker's, mark as it was usual to attribute prestigious pieces to the prominent member of the firm.

The firm opted for a silver gilt finish, a natural choice since the Prince Regent always expressed a preference for gilt plate rather than white silver.

What might seem surprising, though, is the choice to deliberately ignore the indications of colours provided by the poem itself.

Homer, and therefore Pope in his translation, describes the shield as being made of silver bars, "stubborn brass", tin and solid gold. The different colours provided by the different materials are an essential component in building up the dramatic description of each scene; the Bear constellation is golden, as are the gods involved in the battle scene with their armour. Silver is the colour of the stream of water that "seems to blush with blood" during the siege scene, indicating that a blood red colour was also present. "A darker metal mixed" enriched the naturalistic view of the harvest and vintage scene and it is silver again that frames the shield with waves so alive they "seemed to roll".

Although the choice of employing only one metal finish may seem at odds with the designer's efforts to reproduce a very naturalistic and dramatically vivid piece, it is in line with the neoclassical approach to art. Classical buildings, sculptures and works of art in general appealed to the modern public because of their aura of austerity and modesty. White marble rendered figures extremely elegant in their abstraction from the material and human world, fascinating the neoclassical eye with their inspirational purity and metaphysical significance.

More recent archaeological research has shown that the majority of buildings and monuments tended, however, to be characterised by a daring and lively polychromy that never revealed itself to the scholars of the Georgian period, who received an altered image of the classical world. Natural pigments such as copper silicate for blue, iron oxide for red and rich gilding were employed. An opaque organic varnish was also applied to architectural details to make materials appear less cold and to protect them from weathering. All these finishes were lost over the centuries to erosion and natural decay.

This is crucial to keep in mind when analysing the classical revival that took place between the XVIII and XIX centuries, as modern admiration for the classical world was strongly based on aesthetics.



A DESIGN FOR A BORDER OF FIGURES FOR THE ACHILLES SHIELD
BY JOHN FLAXMAN (1755- 1826), C. 1809-10



© Victoria and Albert Museum, London
E.1073-1980

A drawing of the border of figures for the Achilles Shield, shown as a frieze, with groups representing: the (1) Cretan Dance, (2) the Marriage Procession, (3) the Argument, (4) the Judicial Appeal, (5) the Siege and Ambuscade, (6) the Tillage, (7) the Harvest Field and (8) the Vintage.

Plan, full size 174 x 1735 mm

Pencil, pen and ink and brown wash on six irregularly cut sheets of laid paper joined to form a panel.

The scene of the Siege and of the Tillage are numbered in pencil “4” and “5” respectively.



© National Portrait Gallery, London
John Flaxman
By Guy Head
Oil on canvas, 1792
NPG 877



THE LEGACY OF THE ACHILLES SHIELD

The idea of producing a large charger in the shape of a shield was not new, but the monumental scale of the project and the number of prestigious artists coordinating the work around the Shield of Achilles had an unprecedented impact on society at the time.

Allegedly Rundell, Bridge and Rundell missed the chance to produce the shield in time for the triumphant celebration of the Duke of Wellington, but a more appropriate and grander occasion presented itself.

As a matter of fact the occasion on which the shield made its debut, the Royal Coronation, generated even more deference and helped to create the myth surrounding this legendary object.

As excitement about the marvellous object spread, the firm of Green, Ward and Green²³ were able to seize the opportunity and chose the affirmed illustrator and painter, Thomas Stothard, as designer (as well as modeller) of the piece. In 1814 Stothard won the committee over with his rapidly acquired knowledge of Wellington's accomplishments and maybe, above all, with his decision to demand a very modest payment, foreseeing the great publicity that the Wellington Shield was to bring.



The Wellington Shield, Apsley House Collection
© The Victoria and Albert Museum

The Wellington Shield²⁴, hallmarked in 1822, was presented to the Duke of Wellington by the Merchants and Bankers of the City of London. It bears the maker's mark of Benjamin Smith, the most celebrated silversmith of the period together with Paul Storr who, just like the latter, worked in-house as a contractor for the royal retailers Rundell, Bridge and Rundell. Perhaps more convex than the Achilles' one, this shield echoes the latter in various ways: the central part presents a radiating decorative pattern that echoes Flaxman's solar element and the equestrian group composition, showing the Duke of Wellington on horseback, reproduces the usual iconography of the triumph of a classical military commander. The outer border is decorated with figural scenes depicting episodes from the Peninsular War and the recognitions the Duke received after his victories. Unlike Flaxman's project, Stothard decides to mark the scenes individually with architectural elements, clearly separating each episode, omitting the sense of continuous movement that is the main characteristic of the Achilles' Shield, which makes its observation an almost immersive experience.

The intricate mechanisms of collaboration between prominent artists and firms of the Regency period are also evident in the making of another memorable commission related to the Shield of Achilles. The Bacchus and Ariadne pair of sideboard dishes is another example of the way in which the design for the Achilles Shield impressed public opinion of the time, ever since its conception and iconography began to circulate amongst the tight circle of retailers, silversmiths and designers.

While the project of the Shield was still in its infancy, two large dishes were executed by Rundell, Bridge and Rundell in 1813 and purchased by William Pole-Tylney-Long-Wellesley, 4th Earl of Mornington (1788-1857), nephew of the Duke of Wellington²⁵. The design was left this time to Thomas Stothard, and Paul Storr was entrusted with the silversmithing work. The centre is decorated with a composition based on a Roman cameo depicting the triumph of Bacchus and his lover Ariadne on their processional chariot while the wide rim shows an intricate composition of bacchanalian masks, musical instruments and thyrsi on a trelliswork base.

A design in the collection of the Tate Gallery²⁶ shows a tray with a more elaborate bacchanalian border, a pattern that was to become very popular amongst Rundell, Bridge and Rundell's clientele and became one of their trademark decorative motifs amongst several similar ones. The unique aspect of this design is the fact that the centre of the tray seems to be adorned with the same iconography of the Bacchus and Ariadne group that



A Monumental & Highly Important Pair of George III Sideboard Dishes, London 1813, Paul Storr. *Koopman Rare Art*

will later appear in the heavily cast pair of dishes, showing again how these designers were prolific in combining their inspirations when working on different objects and patronage.

The Bacchus and Ariadne pair of dishes were so greatly admired by Rundell, Bridge and Rundell's clientele that prominent patrons soon commissioned further examples of them. The Price Regent acquired one in 1815, the 2nd Earl of Aylesbury in 1817, and a further pair was made for the Duke of Cumberland in 1815. In 1820 Philip Rundell produced and marked a single dish with a central decoration of a winged Nike clearly derived from this lot, further proof of the admiration that surrounded the Bacchus and Ariadne group.

The image of the winged Nike bearing the palm of Victory amongst the group of horses was very possibly based on a design by Benedetto Pistrucci, the Roman gem-engraver, medallist and coin-engraver who became chief medallist at the Mint in 1817.

In the late summer of the same year his design of St George slaying the dragon was the subject chosen for the new gold sovereign and the theme was so appreciated that a shield with the same iconography was produced²⁷.

The Shield of St. George is closely related to that of Achilles' first of all in its production: it was a project conceived by

Rundell, Bridge and Rundell with Philip Rundell marking the piece. The central medallion presents a traditional patriotic figure that, even though it is derived from the Christianity, gains its iconographic inspiration from classicism and, in particular, from the Greek imagery of the Parthenon Friezes once again. On the rim, to mirror the central scene, the silversmith depicts a scene directly copied from the Parthenon Friezes, the riders in the procession in honour of the goddess Athena along the sacred way. The source is imitated so openly by Pistrucci to pay homage to a very significant event in British cultural history: in 1816, the Earl of Elgin petitioned the House of Commons to purchase the large collection of marbles that he assembled while serving as British Ambassador to the Ottoman Court. The Elgin Marbles were placed in the British Museum to educate the nation and have remained there ever since. Their influence on the cultural patrimony was particularly crucial for the development of the neoclassical aesthetics in British decorative arts.

The Shield of St George probably had a royal commission but was never claimed nor paid. It remained in the collection of the workshop of Rundell, Bridge and Rundell until it was bequeathed to Joseph Neeld, Philip Rundell's great nephew.

Flaxman and Rundell's Shield of Achilles continued to influence the production of presentational silver items for decades to come.

Well into the Victorian era, more than fifty years after the circulation of the pieces that were previously discussed, another significant shield made its appearance. The so-called Outram Shield²⁸, produced by the firm of Hunt & Roskell and designed by the sculptor Henry Hugh Armstead, was based on the colonial triumphs of a figure of national relevance, Sir James Outram, British General of the Bombay army in India.

It is interesting to note the way in which the classical sources shift from Greek to Roman over the decades, and the monarchs are interested in conveying messages with a different significance. If during the reign of George IV it was crucial to underline the importance of the monarch as a guide for the stability and justice of the nation, in the Victorian era this concept is already established and the new concern becomes the importance of securing British rights over colonies.

It is for this reason that instead of taking inspiration from the Greek system of democratic values, expressed by Hellenistic art such as the Parthenon Friezes and that constituted the vocabulary of neoclassical designers such as Flaxman, the decoration for the outer border of the Outram Shield is based on the traditional Roman colonial celebration: the triumphant column of Trajan, which illustrates the colonial expansion of the Roman empire with a solemnity that is almost derived from divine right.

Only the most significant artworks in history left such a persistent mark on popular culture the way in which the Shield of Achilles did.

Its power summarises the excellence of its execution with the incredible rediscovery of the classical world that played a crucial role in pushing Georgian society towards the enlightenment and technical advancement that characterised the modern world.

Classical epic poems are nowadays considered part of that canon of literature universally recognised as masterpieces, books that helped the development of human thought and built the foundations of civilization. Anyone can recognise themselves in the struggles that Homer's characters face; the human instincts are explored and expressed in a complexity that covers every possible aspect of the human life. Love and passion, grief and suffering, anger and hatred, frustration and torment are expressed in such a comprehensive way that makes them part of the cultural patrimony that defines us as human beings.

In the same way, the creation by human hand of a legendary object, infused with such a complex aura, was something that gave modern society the confidence to expose itself to the struggles of the modern and industrialised world that the new mankind was ready to face and overcome.



Study for the Wellington Shield: Design for the Shield, Surrounded by Sketches of Various Figures, Thomas Stothard, circa 1810.
© Tate, CC-BY-NC-ND 3.0, T09987



St. George Salver, London 1823,
Philip Rundell. © Victoria and Albert
Museum M.67-1950



The Outram Shield, Electrotpe replica,
London 1868, Giovanni Franchi and Son.
© Victoria and Albert Museum REPRO.1868-105



A. The Celestial Globe with 4 Zones dividing it. Convex and Spher.
 B. The Celestial Signs.
 C. The Figures, divided into 8 pieces by Homer.
 D. The Celestial Signs correspondent to 4 Figures & Actions.
 E. Lucare?
 F. The Ocean, round & whole buckler. Hom. 18. vers.
 G. The Three Rings to fasten & strong of braced of buckle
 to 4 Arm. Hom. 18. vers.

F. The three Rings to fasten & thong of braced & buckle
to y Arm. Rom. 18. vers.

²⁸ Currently in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum,

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